



Series Book One
Third Edition

Creating and Resolving Conflict in Fiction



Cate Russell-Cole

Creating and Resolving Conflict in Fiction

Four Dimensional Characterisation Series

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Introduction

The Four Dimensional Characterisation Series has been written to give writers an insight into the psychology that can be used to build characters and plot lines. It will assist you in building in personality traits and behaviour patterns which make them realistic, unique and believable.

People are at least four dimensional. We have our three dimensional physical form, which you can describe in terms of:

- How people look: hair, eye colour, height, preferred clothing.
- Mannerisms such as sitting a certain way, nodding frequently when listening, nervous habits.
- How they smell: do they regularly use tobacco, cook with garlic or use a signature cologne.
- What their voice, cough, sneeze, singing or laugh sounds like.
- Problematic or distinctive characteristics such as oily hair, dry skin or uneven ears.

The fourth, and mostly unseen dimension, is their positive or negative life experiences that replay in their subconscious mind, motivating their behaviour and driving their emotions.

This dimension is what produces most patterns and most people don't even realise that they exhibit these patterns or what is really behind them. As a writer, this gives you a great plot line as your characters can either find themselves or get more lost along the way. You have more room for explorative narratives.

I hope this series gives you a wealth of ideas to use to enhance your craft.



Disclaimer

This book contains very brief, non clinical introductions to the conflict and conflict resolution. It is in no way meant to be used as advice or guidance in how to get through any personal psychological / emotional or spiritual issues you have had, or are now experiencing. No liability will be accepted for your use of this material for any purpose, or any of the material on the linked web sites. Please consider what you read carefully, seek additional professional advice and make up your own mind. Thank you.

A Word of Encouragement for Writers

The best preparation I had for becoming a writing teacher was my counselling training. Not because of the insight it gave me into human behaviour, but because of the skills I developed in working to raise people's self-esteem. That is the hardest task I have ever faced in the classroom.

When I teach the Write Your Life Story course locally, I work through adult training programs and our City Council libraries. For convenience, the libraries are located in easy to reach places, such as shopping centres. To be more precise, one is in my nearest Westfield Shopping town where I go to the chemist, do the banking and buy our groceries. After eight years of teaching at that particular library, I had to change where I did my routine shopping. I kept running into red-faced, apologetic students, who hadn't written a word since the course finished. I wasn't shopping for guilt, just milk!

I have students who come back to me with finished autobiographical works and huge smiles on their faces. I love that. I have had excellent writers in my class and we've had a lot of fun. Out of hundreds of students, only one person ever came to the conclusion that writing was impossible for them. They just didn't get it! What seems to have happened with my apologetic students, is that they simply found themselves lost and overcome, once the supportive classroom environment was gone. They had no plan, no confidence... thus they stalled.

This reflects what I believe to be the biggest hinderance writer's face: the battle of the mind in keeping your confidence high enough to write until you achieve. As much as you may love writing, it takes the traits of a warrior to stay balanced on the climb to success. You need clear intent; fearlessness; determination and the willingness to conquer new territory. Plus obviously you need commitment. If you are half-hearted about it and it's only a hobby, it's highly unlikely you'll achieve outstanding success.

So do you want to be a hobby writer or a dedicated author? That's your choice and on that choice, you will choose your level of success. I like Randall Anway's quote: "When you think about it, most people don't really want to be creative – it's dangerous and uncomfortable – like being a passenger in a car driven by a maniac."

Cyndi Kaplan* pins the secret to motivation and success beautifully when she says, "Attitude and state of mind have as much to do with creativity as talent and ability. There is a big gap between the people who have great ideas, and those who execute them... The real creative people are the doers, the ones who take their ideas and action them... People who believe in themselves sufficiently will fight for their ideas and inventions. They will push for solutions, even in the face of obstacles. A strong will is the best companion for talent... A creative person needs a healthy self-esteem and the ability to keep going until they achieve their goals."

If your true desire is to push ahead and write, it may be helpful for you to take the time to write down what causes you to abandon projects. Do you identify the reason/s to be

boredom, overcommitment, perfectionism, fear of failure, or a lack of discipline? Try to find ways to get around these obstacles and achieve your creative desires. It is worth it.

Success comes in small steps, sometimes they seem microscopic! However, success as a writer can be achieved. It takes work and effort, but if you love what you do, no matter what detours you take in life, your love of writing will pull you back and reward you.

**Quote taken from "Awaken Your Business Creativity: Turn Your Potential Into Profit" by Cyndi Kaplan, 1995, Millennium Books, Alexandria, Australia.*

Chapter Challenge

What hinders you from writing? Jot down a list of the things that hold you back and then brainstorm possible answers. Seek support and useful advice from fellow writers online.

The Most Important Thing About Conflict

Conflict is an area of communication that is frequently misunderstood. We know from divorce statistics, that marriages often fail due to arguments over money. However, is money the real issue which is being fought over?

There are actually two components to conflict. The first is the topic that you are fighting about. This may be money; or it may be child rearing; leaving the lid off the toothpaste; issues in the workplace; differences of opinion in a friendship; half-hearted gift choices; which family member to spend Christmas with; why the television is always so loud; or why your co-workers keep banging on the desk and won't stop! A frequent protest is "do you *have* be so selfish *all* the time?" There's a clue...

Whether in a marriage, family, friendship or workplace, the topic is not the real fuel that keeps the sparring flames alight. It is the way the other party responds to your concerns and makes you feel that does the real damage.

Issues over money may come down to a deep sense of personal insecurity that propels you into fight or flight responses to survive. You may feel you are no longer being listened to; that your opinion doesn't count and that you don't have any value. This leads to feeling unloved, unwanted, useless, helpless and/or confused. That is what sparks the fighting off. That is what keeps it going, generating those awful arguments, where everything you ever did wrong is dredged back up.

Responding that way in an argument can be point scoring to humiliate and undermine the other party as vengeance. However, sometimes it can be our natural free-associating response. When we're worked up, all the other times that person has made us feel worthless and stupid rise to the surface. This reinforces any concerns we have that we've fallen short and have less value in the relationship. From there relationship erosion occurs.

There is an old piece of advice which says, never go to bed angry. In short, if you don't deal with each of these offences, the negatives build up. Over time, letting many large or small incidents go unresolved, can create a potentially lethal explosion of anger, bitterness and fear which can slowly kill relationships. With so much having gone so wrong, can you even fix it?

So when you are writing about arguments or frustrations in your character's relationships, don't forget to represent that way that character feels. Let the rejection become as obvious to the reader as the incident which caused the fight. That way, it will all make much more sense.

Chapter Challenge

What are the main areas of conflict you have experienced in life, or that you see in action around you? Quickly write them down and then identify which emotions may be behind them. Are they fear, rejection, jealousy or hate? How can you use these keys in your work?

How to Fuel Conflicts and Misunderstandings

Have you ever seen a misunderstanding in a film or book and thought, “if only they’d said it this way, that would never have happened!” As a fiction writer, plot twists need to be built into story lines. One way to enable setbacks in a story is to build in miscommunication between the characters. That can be easy to write, however, if you want to create a realistic relationship that isn’t too simplistic to engage the reader, you can use the more subtle basics of interpersonal communication to move the story towards your desired destination.

For a start, characters need to understand what is being said to them. Simple? Not when you consider the filters that communication may go through before it’s interpreted in someone else’s head. Filters can include:

- Whether all parties are speaking in their native language.
- Differences in level of education: is one character more highly educated and using unfamiliar or deliberately fancy or specialised terms?
- Age differences and differing maturity levels which can mean acceptable words, cultural nuances or trends such as dress are offensive or not understood. Or an adult trying to speak at a child’s level and vice versa.
- The effects of alertness or lack of, due to sleep, health, temperature in the setting, medications, drugs etc.
- Cultural differences in how words are used, tone of voice and eye contact.
- Differences in moral values.
- Expectations based on whether the other party is of lower rank / importance or higher. Are they equal, fighting for equality, or in a leader – subservient relationship? Do both parties see it the same way?
- Non verbal communication such as posture, pacing or still, tone of voice, raised eyebrows, gestures showing love or anger etc.
- Perceived motivational factors: is that person out to get me, on my side or not worth my time? Should I listen carefully or who cares what they are saying?
- The strength or weakness of the underlying relationship and level trust and familiarity. Is it love or hate?
- Expectations of the other’s ability to understand or follow a course of action; which may or may not be realistic.
- That person’s hopes and dreams they are trying to accomplish, which are subtly pushing forward what they want.
- Sensory stimuli such as offensive smells, overly bright or dim light, background noise or vibrations. For example, ever tried to communicate in an earthquake with a burst sewer pipe next to you and no lighting? You get distracted.

These kinds of filters work for both parties. When someone is about to say something, what comes out of their mouth goes through their individual filters first. They're then interpreted by the receiver/s through their filters. So much can go wrong!

The quickest way to make simple messages go awry is to be vague. In counselling, you are trained to encourage clients to be very specific about what they are saying. You clarify "I feel bad" as hurt, rejected, tired or misunderstood. Staying vague easily leads to people getting the wrong idea.

The level of misunderstanding can have different strengths too. It can be an awkward moment where what is said just leaves the character feeling a bit uncomfortable, but it's no big deal. Well, at least not until that moment is built on by more awkward moments... If you really want the stress level to be elevated, it can be a situation which creates serious tension, has destructive ramifications and which leads, inevitably, to a crisis which must be addressed. You can start with small issues to lead up to the climax in your story. Let the distrust, hurt and animosity slowly grow. Alternatively, in a positive setting, you can use the same principles to slowly gain trust, allow bonding and have the characters working together cohesively against a common enemy.

Have a look around you at the plot techniques you see used in books, movies and on television. Also have a look at how you see the people in your life acting which moves them forward or slides them backwards into a poor behaviour patterns. The trick of learning about how human behaviour functions is to be an observer. Sometimes the obvious to others is a complete mystery to someone who is fearful, hurting, tired or confused. As an author, you can subtly or overtly manoeuvre what is said and interpreted in any way you please. The possibilities are limitless.

Chapter Challenge

Write about a misunderstanding that could have been avoided, but include the impact of three of the communication filters above. Consider how your understanding of these filters make your work richer?

What Character Traits Go With What Type of Person?

As authors, we often write using traditional character archetypes that readers recognise. Archetypes we immediately understand include the hero, villain, mentor, outcast, damsel in distress etc. They have an important role to play in literature, teaching us lessons which can also help us on our own life quests.

When I was in my twenties, a book was very popular in my peer group which categorised people using four personality types. Understanding them could solve all their problems! I am absolutely, solidly against any stereotypical categorisation, human beings are too complex! So I did the research.

I discovered those types were based on the ancient theory of the four humours and outright rejected it. I am not alone: in researching this post, someone was talking about how they bought a book published in 1896, which was based on the four humours in children. The original owner had written inside: "Critique: Psychologists say it's unscientific – lacks rigor, precision, control of facts. Nevertheless it sure is widespread in use and application, or trials at it! Feb.29.40. R.N.S."

The four humours are based on the balances of four body fluids: blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile. They were seen to affect temperament, making you either sanguine, melancholic, phlegmatic or choleric. Of course, the in-vogue book presented it as a more advanced theory. My friends didn't know what they were really reading and they weren't impressed when they heard what the theory was actually based on. Why would they be impressed, even if body fluids weren't involved in dictating behaviour? Who would want to be labelled as, say, melancholic? Do you want to be classed as "crestfallen, crummy, dejected, desolate, despondent, destroyed, disconsolate, dispirited, down and out?" It's not likely to do wonders for your self-esteem. Neither was one theory we learnt in psychology, that typed people based on body shape. If you were tall and thin, or small and fat, you had the same traits as all the other people with your body type. Does this make sense?

One of my memoir students asked me to sit through an introduction to the enneagram. I was having a hard time with a co-worker and thought well, why not? It's always good to hear a new theory. I love psychology. I easily located my dominant personality type and it shocked me. I found myself publicly looking into the private parts of how my mind works, that I never wanted revealed to anyone else. It was all there on paper in tale-telling detail and it was scary... particularly for a psychology buff who does not believe in typing. Oddly enough, it didn't box me in, it gave me strategies for getting free, which is exactly what the enneagram is supposed to do. It is about growth and healing

I am not asking you to take all this too seriously. I don't live by it religiously or refer to it often. I occasionally pull out my Enneagram notes when I am stuck on a people problem and it does help, but I would still never rigidly adhere to it. Whether you want to believe in it or not, for writers building characters, the enneagram is a gold mine! It is similar to a road map for human behaviour which shows your basic motivational needs; strengths,

weaknesses, temptations and what you can do to balance out your negatives. To increase it's usefulness, there is information online on how to get on with other types which clash with your own. That can be used to create dynamic plot conflicts.

Let me give you an example on how this can work. Let me play devil's advocate and use a creative personality as an example. They are referred to as the Thinker or Observer (the five). They are withdrawn, thought-driven, self-motivated, happy to be alone and have a strong need for independence and privacy. Often they don't fit in, in social groups. This is a weakness of their personality type. Problems for fives include isolation, pride, power seeking and their intellectual approach can drive people in the other direction, seeking warmer company! Famous fives include William Rhenquist, Stephen Hawking, Francis Crick, Helen Keller, Wittgenstein, and Arthur C. Clarke.

If you pitted a five up against a seven in your story, seven being 'the enthusiast,' who is energetic, an entertainer and spontaneous, you can cause serious sparks to fly. Place them together in a working environment or unlikely relationship and the potential for depth and conflict is endless.

Another example of how using the Enneagram gives characters depth, comes into play when you are building the personality of an antagonist. Instead of the good guy just being good, and the bad guy inherently having to be bad, now the bad guy is bad because he is a Reformer (the one). He is compulsively motivated by a need to make things better, but he's handled the challenges he is facing the wrong way. It has created fights and barriers, not change. He is out of balance (the enneagram shows you how to create balance) and is a danger to himself, as much as he is to others. I have a relatable, humanised bad guy, who doesn't mean to be a rat and has no idea why people are opposing him, but he can't stop himself. He isn't a one-dimensional, one-task piece of the novel puzzle, who simply exists, as a bad guy is needed for the story line to work.

Enneagram research will also give you lists of ways that the various types can get along with other people. It flags sources of conflicts, how to approach them and other techniques which will have writers in seventh heaven! This is a mystically based theory which has been around for centuries. At it's simplest level it is an excellent idea generator, that you will find useful and intriguing.

No one has just one type they fit wholly and solely into. We have a little of every type in us, but we have two other less dominant types which are called wings. They balance us out. A five will have the wings of a four: the romantic, withdrawn ideal-seeker who wants authenticity, self expression and who can also be deeply empathetic. Famous 5/4s include Sigmund Freud. Fives also have a six wing, which is the loyalist, an attachment making approval-seeker. Famous 5/6s include Charles Darwin, Frederich Nietzsche, David Lynch, and Isaac Newton. You can see how a five could work themselves into difficult situations as they are a deep thinker, wanting to solve problems; are seeking approval for doing so... but can push people away as they are so independent and socially stilted. The five can become one very frustrated, lonely individual, with answers no one will listen to.

This is where the enneagram displays it's potential power to transform. To move away from being a dominant five who needs to master things, is prone to pride and is scared of helplessness or being seen as incompetent; you follow the triangle in the diagram to see what you do to balance. So from a five, go up the arrow to the eight: the boss. Taking that path, the five has to come out of their mental world to lead and interact with others. One step further, if you were predominantly an eight, the ideal is to go to two, which means instead of being based in power and control, you take a balancing, helping role.

Of course, it is a lot more complex than that. This is a mystically based theory which has been around for centuries. At it's simplest level it is an excellent idea generator you will find useful and intriguing. Just do the test by yourself. You could be in for confronting revelations you didn't see coming!

Enneagram Resources:

<http://www.9types.com/writeup/enneagram.html#FAQ>

[http:// www.enneagraminstitute.com/](http://www.enneagraminstitute.com/) [http:// www.enneagram.com.au/](http://www.enneagram.com.au/)

Chapter Challenge

Go to an Enneagram web site and take the test on behalf of your character and again, for each of your most dominant secondary characters. What clashing forces can the mix of personalities give you, that you can add into your work? What insights into how they behaviour functions have you gained?

Human Behaviour Is All About Patterns

Before I began teaching, I became a social worker. One of our lecturers gave us a sound piece of counselling advice that is also a brilliant tool in writing about fictional or real characters. 'People behave in patterns. Look for the patterns, then you can start to understand what drives them.' Identifying patterns helps you see their weaknesses, strengths and what genuinely makes them tick.

So what kind of patterns can you build into a character, or use to drive a storyline? You have a choice of positive and negative patterns. It is easy to limit your characters and bias your writing by placing the focus on negative behaviours. You can limit them to being the serial womaniser; the bully; the shy person; the issue avoider; the addict; the co-dependent; the unlucky in love or the self destructive. Try and also consider people's strengths: confidence in their ability in a specific area; kindness towards strangers or animals; a belief one day they will make it no matter what; love of family; strong faith or intuition; determination; emotional stability. What do they value the most? What will they fight to achieve? That way you will have a more balanced personality and more avenues to explore in your storyline.

If your character has been through a particular life experience, do a little research into the psychology behind it. It will assist you in building in personality traits and behaviour patterns which make them realistic. For example, on the *******"My Way Out" web site, Mario is talking about the patterns of behaviour you see in adults who come from families which were neurotic or alcoholic. He identifies six dominant behavioural patterns: the caretaker, people pleaser, martyr, workaholic, perfectionist and stump.

While those roles may look like cliches or stereotypes, many times it is the common attributes of people who have lived through these situations that give rise to those images, so you can't always write them off as overused. Again, look for positive traits as well. The traits of a survivor pull people through their past and present challenges. They are strong motivators which can fuel heroes and heroines, including the every day kind who aren't overthrowing evil or slaying dragons.

******<http://www.mywayout.org/community/f40/gernaral-patterns-behaviour-47909.html>

Chapter Challenge

Over the next few days, consider how many behavioural patterns you can see around you. Write them down, plus any others that come to mind. How can you incorporate them into your work in progress?

Using Power Dynamics

Every relationship, whether a friendship, romantic attachment or a working partnership, goes through a series of natural evolutionary stages. You have a 'getting to know you' phase where you connect and click. From there you have the honeymoon where everything is peachy... then reality hits with the power struggle. This is where most relationships fall apart. Suddenly, the areas in which you differ appear. Arguments start, tensions build and the harmony is gone. This is the place where you start to wonder whether or not you should really be there.

For writers, this is fertile ground for plot and character development. Your character has choices: do I stay and fight for my rights; do I bow to the will of the other power; or do I break free? Regardless of whether you write fiction or non fiction, understanding the dynamics of power in human interactions gives depth to your writing.

There are five main different types of power that have been identified in society and psychology. The most basic types are:

Coercive Power: the power to punish for doing wrong, being different, or disagreeing. What scares you into submission to these people? (Asserted by people such as parents, spouses, siblings, family members, Governments, bosses, bullies, peers/friends, Legal Systems, Cult leaders.)

Reward Power: the power to give rewards/awards for productivity or acceptable behaviour; which may include adhering to rules, fitting in with the status quo or following a specific way of thinking and believing. They have what you want. What will you give or compromise to get it? (Utilised by parents, spouses, siblings, family members, Governments, bosses, bullies, peers/friends, Legal Systems, Cult leaders, Competition Judges, those monitoring levels of achievement in any area.)

Legitimate Power: power granted to individuals by legitimate officials. These people may be the 'gatekeepers' to what you need, such as money, status, privileges, freedom or goods and services you highly value. They may also be there to keep you out of trouble. (May include Police officers, Politicians, School Monitors, Supervisors, Managers, Lawyers, Banks and financial institutions, parents, guardians, appointed delegates.)

Expert Power: these are the people who have studied or worked for many years in a field. They are regarded as able to make hard decisions from a complex knowledge base, which the average person cannot match. They hold knowledge and skills that you may not be able to get hold of any other way. Often, they are simply deferred to without challenge. (This type of power belongs to the 'top brass' of any society. Doctors, Lawyers, Ph.D. level teachers and researchers, Admirals, Generals etc.)

Referrant Power: this is the type of power fuelled by charisma, awe and reverential respect. You just want to be near them, you want their magic to rub off on you and elevate

you out of your dreary existence. (Your spouse may have had this power on you at some stage, a 'crush' sure would have. Also includes movie, tv and music superstars; evangelistic personalities in marketing, religion and politics; mentors: anyone you adore for reasons of your own.)

There may be more than one form of power at play in a relationship, which creates complicated challenges for the characters trying to work their way back to harmony. The greatest complication is the role of ego in power.

Ego is an area I find fascinating. In many areas of spirituality it is considered destructive and to be kept firmly in check, if not eliminated. However, it is a necessary part of the human psyche that can propel us towards positive success, or get us out of danger, as it enables us to recognise our intrinsic value. It is the true hinge of power.

Rewards can be refused or punishment can be given and it may not be such a big deal. You can refuse my mortgage application; give me a fine for parking in a loading dock; fail to give me an Academy reward or just not notice humble, little old me and I may be able to deal with those things. However, if my ego is dependent on gaining that reward, then you have a strong power base on which to manipulate me, which can breed volatile conflicts.

Furthermore, ego can be used to turn the power play back onto the person originally holding the power. For example, if you engage a lawyer to act for your benefit, but understand legal processes which they believe only they have the right to know about, you can use that to disempower the lawyer. The real owner of the power has changed. If the lawyer has a balanced ego that can cope with someone else sharing their 'expert' knowledge, plus the emotional security to be scrutinised and challenged, there is no conflict. All parties can work cohesively. If the lawyer is insecure and their self worth is dependent on being the expert, carnage can ensue. The plot lines are endless and I know my mystery and horror writer friends will have a field day with this!

I could say more, but I will leave you to discover this area for yourself. As I have said, it is fascinating and will lead you in many directions which can make your work more realistic, engaging and thought provoking. As one of the car advertisements says, sometimes the most potent aspect of power is choosing when not to use it...

Chapter Challenge

Which source of power do you see as being the most potent? How can you use it to hinder or help your main character in reaching their goals? Are there other sources of power mentioned here, that you can use to try and slow them down, creating a deeper sub-plot?

Not Too Easy To Swallow: Avoiding Nauseating Resolutions

I love a good story with a happy, or inspirational ending. However one thing that grates on me, is conflicts that resolve too easily. You often see it in the last minutes of a movie, where the story has to be wound up fast and the female lead melts into her loved one's arms and all is suddenly well... while in real life, she'd still be spitting fury, finding a good lawyer and wanting to poke his eyes out! Face it, we've all seen plot lines that have a 'too convenient' ending and we've written them as well... So how can we do better?

Where there are human beings, there are no easy answers in regards to conflict. There is, however, a process of working through the problem that people churn through mentally and emotionally. Reflecting that in your writing can be one way of moving towards a resolution. If you progressively show the character's thought processes moving steadily towards forgiveness and co-operation, you can tie the ends up nicely. If you want tension in the story, you can picture the internal vacillation between wanting peace and desiring power and/or revenge. People can naturally alternate between these two, as emotions surface, are stilled, then resurface as new offence has occurred. Loyalty and love play their part: for the writer, it is delightfully messy and crammed with potential!

Please note that above I said "forgiveness and co-operation," not compromise. Compromise always becomes bogged down, with someone winning more than the other/s. The focus needs to be on working together; allowing calm in; and being willing to listen to the other person's side of the story. That is basically the entire magical essence of conflict resolution: being able to step aside from your fervour for a time, to hear the other point of view. Easy to do in life? No way! As an author, you can enjoy playing with that process.

Another essential story component you can experiment with is emotional complexity. Anger is the most visible demon in fights. Anger functions very much like an iceberg. You can see the top sticking out of the water, but the vast body is underneath. That body is full of what we don't want to feel: such as betrayal, rejection, humiliation, hopelessness and all the nasties. It is easier to give in to anger rather than feel the deeper hurt. The Dalai Llama has said that anger gives you false energy. To get your characters out of the angst and into harmony, they need to ignore that energy and face up to their deeper demons. Again, this is a hard road for anyone. I have seen people in conflict release anger then fall into depression. The seal over their wounds was broken and they couldn't cope with what rose to the surface.

Your other option in wrapping up conflicts can be to leave them partially unresolved. I once had a conflict with a writing friend over whether every story had to have a happy ending. She claimed it absolutely had to; I claimed that was implausible, as real life is rarely like that. It's a matter of taste in what you like to write. You can leave characters willing to continue to be together: still with a need to heal but with a willingness to move forward. That provides a positive conclusion. Or they can realise there were a bunch of misunderstandings, see the error of their ways... let the sighing, swooning and mush commence! I find that cliched, but there are readers who just love that approach, so why

not? Fiction is escapism. It doesn't have to conform to reality. Again, it's your call as a writer.

Some wounds and disagreements can take years to heal. Some appear to be fixed, then rise again over another issue with the same power struggle underneath, (which you could work into a sequel or series...) So what makes conflicts unable to be resolved at all? Again, we're back to our ego. Feuds that go on between families, tribes, countries or individuals can be grounded in their sense of self worth, which is significantly dependent upon the outcome. Thus, they will not let go! It would be to betray who they are at the very core. To make it worse, if a conflict has gone on for so long that too many resources have been invested (emotional, financial or property damage rectified), people can be unwilling to let go, as all that investment is lost and now meaningless. So you fought that hard for nothing? It's unpalatable.

If you do a search on conflict resolution on the Internet, you'll find a wealth of resources. The best material I have come across comes from the United Nations and similar world peace organisations. This particular article is helpful: http://worldpeace.org.au/9_steps_conflict_resolution.asp

Chapter Challenge

Can you recall a conflict which went on for too long, way past the time when it should have been resolved? Try and identify the reasons that happened. Was it because of pride? Was there some form of fear behind it? Sketch out in a scene, one way which the parties involved could have let go and allowed the matter to settle... but don't cheat. Any change must occur slowly to be realistic. People very rarely abruptly change.

Making or Breaking Character Relationships

Romance writers, how satisfying is it to have your character find their soul mate! But is it really all about that? If you cut down to the basic motivations for relationships, there is a strong underlying drive for physical, emotional, sexual and social needs to be met. Often, especially in the current chicklit, that is the real power which dictates that a girl must have a man! It's not just loneliness or wanting eye candy, there are long-term quality of life issues at play.

If you are writing past the initial romance, you can delve into this deeper. Girl has met boy; real life has commenced and is as big a problem as it ever was! Falling in love doesn't eliminate bills, family hassles, career stresses and the other ho-hum elements of real life. Girl and boy may start to fight. Dissatisfaction sets in. Great romances falter or end. Why? At that point, the writer has to ask, what is really driving the partnership along? What dictates the benefits each partner gets from continuing to be part of that couple? What robs the partners of their individuality and self-fulfillment? Perhaps it is the balance of power.

Most relationships have a dominant and submissive partnership of some kind. The success of that is a prime factor that determines the health of the partnership. I am talking about how couples function together in every aspect of their lives, down to money, child rearing and who gets to choose meals. Unless both parties can work together unselfishly without being choked by unresolved emotional issues, they are living in a state of compromise and unmet needs.

"I don't know how many times I've held back my feelings, and stuff I just knew I couldn't tell him because it wasn't what I was allowed to think or do. I wasn't supposed to be me; I was supposed to be a perfectly behaved princess that did what was expected. I guess I was scared I'd lose him, but it happened anyway. Maybe deep down he knew I was lying by being what he dictated. Maybe he picked up my insecurity, I was always scared I'd do the wrong thing and it would all end and I'd be on my own again with nothing. He sure was the boss of that relationship, no matter how sweet or how many times he told me he believed in me." Maree 26. (This is an actual quote from a magazine. It's not fictional.)

Some people prefer a partner with a stronger temperament, as they can co-exist happily while someone else calls the shots for both. Yet others fall in love with a decisive partner, then later come to see the same traits as control and manipulation. They find out the hard way that they are not allowed to take the reigns, or truly be themselves. Breaking free from that, or finding a mutually beneficial solution is a plot that readers will devour, as they want to know how to do the same!

What everyone ultimately desires in relationships, is unconditional love, acceptance and a partner that values you for your uniqueness without wanting to change you. It's when we're robbed of the space to speak, think and feel freely without condemnation; or to be ourselves with our own goals and values, that we feel like we are being stuffed in a box and suffocated. Studies have found that couples who are secure enough in themselves to

allow the other partner those freedoms, have an equal balance of power and met needs... and thus, long and successful marriages.

The researchers also say that to build an equal partnership you need to be able to stand on your own two feet! This is where your downtrodden character finds emancipation. It comes down to them learning to meet their own needs, stand up for their rights and having a balance that includes support from family and friends, not just the beloved other. When you hold hands with someone, you are supporting the weight of your own body; you don't transfer your weight onto the other person. You stand separate, yet together, and this is ideally the best way to maintain a relationship. You are able to freely relate and co-operate without threat of losing yourself to another's expectations.

According to Dr John Gottman from "The Love Lab," the way a couple fights is a good predictor of whether they will stay together or split. If they are critical, defensive, or withdrawn, you have problems! If they use humour, show affection for one another and acknowledge the other's point of view, then can work through issues and survive.

Other factors which lead to break ups are whirlwind romances where life time decisions are made when passion is on an unrealistic high. When the passion subsides, as it will, the relationship quickly fails. Great romances are hard to maintain, especially if there has never been a chance to come down to earth and deal with concrete problems. Good choices are made over a longer period where people get to know each other and know what they are prepared to give. It's also interesting to note that couples who live together then get married, are more divorce prone.

It's an asset for a writer to take the time to build developing characters, grappling with the balance between interdependence and dependence. Romantic love can break out of the clichés to become lasting and more wonderful than when it started. Reality based love stories will never look like an easy fix Hollywood blockbuster, but the quality of your work will be relatable for the reader... plus better than anything any movie producer could ever devise.

Chapter Challenge

How do you write about couple's fights, or the disappointments that inevitably settle in, within a relationship? It could be helpful to revisit your ideas and/or research again. Do a Google search on your topic and see if you can find new insights on how those conflicts work or destroy. Find ways to make the conflict and hurt more realistic by reading people's first hand accounts and self-help articles for couples, that apply.

Secrecy and the Death of Trust

On the surface level, regaining trust seems like a lost cause, so if you want to murder innocence; quench love; create a solid basis for hatred to brew; or build an unresolvable conflict. Writing about an acute loss of trust is how you achieve those ends easily. Even better, build it in by suspicion and secrecy. Nothing puts a relationship on alert more, than one partner being aware that insidious undercurrents are laying just under the surface of what they can see. It reminds me of the Men in Black movies, where there was a little alien at the controls of a normal sized human body. In many cases in that movie, nothing was what it seemed to be. Human relationships can work in exactly the same way!

When looking at the issue of lost trust, I came across this posting on an Internet message board. It was answering a cry for help from a young woman whose husband was hooked on pornography. It highlights the whole issue of trust in relationships.

"If you cannot have trust then there is no relationship. Take it from me. I was married for over five years. Then I found a number in his wallet. I called and a woman answered it, she was hoping that I was my hubby. I became paranoid. I couldn't let him go anywhere without having him followed or leaving him alone at the house without having the line tapped. So I fell apart. I needed that trust that he stole from me. Now can take it for what its worth or you can let it kill you." Signed Anonymous

For fiction writers, any loss of trust brings up pivotal questions which sway your plot in a negative direction:

- How do characters restore trust when it's lost?
- Can they restore it?
- Is it worth restoring, or will there always be an unfillable void in the relationship, that has awesome potential for its destruction?
- Have they broken trust repeatedly in the past?
- Is your character an idiot because they didn't see the signs?
- Will they do it again in the future?
- Can anyone trust anything they do? How does anyone know what they are thinking?

What a minefield of problems any kind of betrayal opens up! What a lovely field of possibilities to pick from as a writer. Causing your characters to lose trust in each other, whatever the relationship type, sabotages "happily ever after" and generates limitless crisis' you can put them through.

The sense that something isn't quite right, or an unexpected revelation of a destructive secret, creates insecurity. That leads to an inevitable sense of betrayal. Secrets which have been discovered can be potentially lethal in relationships. They are often seen as justifiable and able to be easily rationalised by the holder. To the one from whom the information has been held back, they represent the offender's dishonesty, disrespect and disrepute.

Robert Kastenbaum, a psychologist, defined trust as whether or not what is said by a person is reliable and matches their actual attitudes and behaviour. Adam Sieler, a journalist, went further and defined trusting someone as an assessment of their sincerity, reliability and competence. He goes on to state the blatantly obvious. By your actions you gain trust, and by your actions you lose it. It makes or breaks relationships.

Alright, so creating destruction by losing trust is easy. But what if, in your storyline, you want to mend the broken trust in a relationship? Is the challenge so difficult that you can't actually do it? Many people feel this is the case in their real life relationships. Plenty of couples have instantly broken up after affairs; when criminal records come to light or when financial sins show up as a nasty shock. As a defence mechanism against this darker part of human nature, there are philosophies which believe that you don't have to trust someone totally. No one can be expected to always maintain an excellent degree of integrity. You get by with some wins and some losses in any relationship. Sometimes they are going to pull a dirty trick on you, but to keep going, you accept it, or the relationship dies off. That sounds more like a lose - lose situation to me. Is that what your character/s want to settle for? That is a decision they will have to grapple with.

Writing in losing trust is easy, writing in regaining trust is something that takes time and forward planning. Rebuilding trust starts with the honest communication of feelings, motivations and actions by your characters. It is a tough road for people to travel; especially where pride and saving face are involved, (often adding to the dishonesty and damage). Unless you are writing a work which has substantial length, if you are striving to make your storyline realistic, you will probably be closing the book with issues still left unresolved whilst the rebuilding work is in progress. as long as it closes on a note of hope, you've won and may have the introduction to a sequel.

If you are writing about small suspicions, they can be glossed over and be used to lead to a final breaking point in the plot. Be warned though, that if you wrap your resolution up too fast with all parties happy and at peace: despite the fact an unendurable war was just raging; your story may appear convenient and fake. You may have to tone the level of emotional havoc down to avoid that occurring. If you have engaged the reader sufficiently to have them relate to the fear of secrets and the hurt of betrayal, then they will not fall for a quick fix. They know real life isn't like that.

Chapter Challenge

Have another look at the list of pivotal questions on trust above, then apply each of them to a scene in your work where trust has been lost. What do you ultimately want for that relationship? How can you stall or advance the healing that must come after a loss of trust? Think deeper and go beyond fast fixes or desperate changes in attitude, which readers sense, wouldn't last in the real world. How can you truly bring your characters to a place where they feel secure with each other again? If you are lost, try searching the web for more helpful resources.

When Do Good Guys Morph Into Foes?

I was once given a piece of wisdom which has proven itself to be solid advice: “you become like those you spend a lot of time with.” It needs to go further and say, you become like the television shows, music and Internet influences you expose yourself to. We are all sponges in our environment.

For example, I know a professional working in a field where there is a high risk of litigation, deserved or not. While not being a lawyer, she does socialise with lawyers as part of the social strata she has grown up with. I often see her avoiding giving straight answers to awkward questions. She is also very careful to never make any kind of confession, which could be used as an admission of an error she has made. My friend is obsessed with minimising liability, which becomes even more odd when she tells me the ways her ‘friends’ have taught her to, shall we say, ‘legally’ circumvent a few boring laws? Liability management and loophole identification have become a habitual mindset for her. She likes that. Personally, I worry about when she will end up on anti-depressants to cope with the stress of having to think that way... It’s a negative packaged in a pretty box, that looks like it’s good for you. It could very well be poisonous.

I wonder if, for better or worse, she has chosen to remain associated with those friends as a safety net. It could be a functional relationship, rather than an enjoyment based bond. They are able to keep her own her toes and in the loop on how to minimise her risks. We rarely choose friends just for the fun of it. Long term friendships provide benefits in some way. Many of those ways are healthy and are essential to our emotional and social needs. However, what you think may be good for you, or fun; can long-term, be mentally damaging. Peer pressures are a camouflaged seductress at any age.

Even if my friend didn’t initially think this way, how long did it take for her to subtly slide into the same behaviour as her peers? She may have adopted it to gain acceptance and avoid conflict with the group. Or her adaption may be due to the effect of saturation.

I am not writing this about obvious influences such as living amongst alcoholics, or in a violent or poverty stricken environment. I am referring to subtle influences on thinking that treacherously change people over time. It can be defined as a form of brain washing, but on a socially acceptable level. It has the same effects as propaganda use in World War II. You can easily repeat an idea, then before you know it, values or people are rejected or honoured. The more you hear something, even if it’s an attitude being expressed, the more you absorb it. Over time it can become a valid, reliable way of thinking, even if on deeper introspection, you know it’s not an ideal or flawless perspective.

Unless an issue or belief is in obvious conflict to our beliefs or startles us, we may not take the time to ponder it on a deeper level. Discernment of what is good or bad may not take place. The concept absorbs into us like moisturiser. Soon, you have softened to the idea and you follow its pathway. At times, even if you outright don’t like a negative attitude, being constantly exposed to it can break down your resistance, until you just give in and act the same way. It’s easier than living in discord.

A character's peers have as much of an effect on our emotional health, as the quality of the air we breathe does on our physical state. Look deeper at what makes up your character's ideas and choices. Then plot in where the feint, but penetrating influences of others, appear and inconspicuously dominate.

Chapter Challenge

Do you know someone who has slowly slid towards a darker mindset without knowing it? Has this happen to you? How can you weave slow slides like this into your storyline; keeping the reader aware of what is happening, while your character has no clue?

About the Author

Cate Russell-Cole is a qualified Creativity Coach and Social Worker. She has a love of the science fiction - fantasy genre and has been writing diaries, appalling poetry and short stories since she was a child. Cate lives in Brisbane, Australia with her husband and two cats and habitually writes everything in Australian English.

Over her career, she has researched, written and taught five creativity-orientated courses; worked as a freelance writer, graphic designer, desktop publisher and has authored ten non-fiction books. Privately, she is a Christian science fiction/ fantasy author who is working on The Chronicles of Mirchar Series, plus a non-fiction study guide on the life of King David.

Other Publications by Cate Russell-Cole

- Write Your Life Story E-Course
- Unleashing Your Creative Spirit
- Prayer Journal Workshop
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- Person To Person: A Layman's Course in Communication Skills
- The Chronicles of Mirchar: The Dragon Tree
- The Chronicles of Mirchar: The Memory Library
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